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# Iron Supplements

Most people think of iron as a metal used to make pots, frying pans, and soup kettles. This same metal (or mineral) also plays a vital role in the body. Iron helps the blood cells carry oxygen. When you don't get enough iron, you may feel tired and lack energy. Over time, without enough iron, your body makes fewer red blood cells. This can cause a condition called iron-deficiency anemia. Since your body doesn't make iron, you must get it from foods or supplements.

## Food sources of iron

Iron is found in a few types of foods. Good sources include:

- Red meat, poultry, fish, eggs
- Dried fruits (especially raisins, prunes, figs)
- Legumes such as dried beans, peas, and lentils
- Breads and cereals with iron added
- Blackstrap molasses
- Spinach
- Foods cooked in cast-iron pans. This is especially true of acidic foods, such as tomatoes and lemons.

## Why use a supplement?

Women often need additional iron because they lose blood during their menstrual period. But even grown men and boys may need a supplement at some point. You may need an iron supplement if any of the following is true for you:

- I rarely eat foods that are high in iron (such as red meat, poultry, dried beans, and foods with iron added).
- I am a vegetarian and I rarely eat legumes (dried beans, peas, lentils).
- I have heavy menstrual periods.
- I am pregnant or breastfeeding.
- I have been diagnosed with iron-deficiency anemia.

## If you take iron

Here are some tips to help you get the most from an iron supplement:

- Take it with vitamin C. Or take it with a beverage high in vitamin C such as orange juice. Either of these will help your body absorb the iron better.
- Don't take an iron supplement with milk. The calcium in milk limits iron absorption.

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- Iron supplements can cause constipation. To prevent this, drink plenty of water, eat high-fiber foods, and exercise often. Also try an iron supplement with an added stool softener.
  - Eat a healthy diet to get all the nutrients your body needs.

See your healthcare provider if you are taking iron supplements and your iron level does not increase. Together you can figure out the next best step.

## **Caution**

The amount of iron each person needs is different and varies by age. Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding need extra iron. But taking more than the suggested amount is not always healthy. Your healthcare provider can help you choose the right amount of iron for you.